

SEEKING THE PERFECT WORDS: TEACHERS AND
TRANSMISSION IN BUDDHIST STORY LITERATURE

I. Introduction

The traditional biography of the Buddha describes in detail the Buddha's quest for a teacher from whom he might receive the proper religious instructions that would lead him to salvation. The quest is doomed to failure, for the Buddha finds all of his would- be masters inadequate. Indeed the search of the Buddha is described from the start as a lonely one, without much assistance from any mentor. It is the gods who show him the four signs that lead to his renunciation, and it is Indra, the king of the gods, who provides him with his first monastic robes (Buddhacarita 3;6;10-14). The Buddha, if he has any guides, has divine ones, who act but do not say much to speed him on his way. In the biography of the Buddha, to the extent that he belongs to any recognizable tradition or lineage of teaching, it is a lineage again of silent presences, of Buddhas of the past, with whom the historical Buddha has no actual physical contact in the course of his own search.

But if the Buddha in the account of his historical life reaches his illuminating insights on his own, such is not the case in other incidents that form what I would call the "extended Buddha biography". These are the many *jātakas* and *avadānas*, which relate incidents from the past lives of the Buddha as well as his historical birth. There are a

number of *avadānas* that describe the Buddha's thirst for knowledge, for the perfect teaching, and the mentor who grants him this wisdom. In many ways the stories are unexpected. The Buddha is a king in these stories, but the teacher is someone whom one would least expect in that role. It is someone totally beyond the pale of civilization, and according to the strict norms of classical Indian society, someone who should lack all the education required to be a teacher. In one story the Buddha's spiritual guide is a hunter, the typical marginal figure in Indian story literature. In another it is a demon, a *rākṣasa*, a creature of evil passion and murderous nature. Again, this is hardly a figure one would expect to be able to serve in the role of spiritual guide.

The encounter between the future Buddha and his would-be master is also fraught with conflict. The spiritual aspirant pays a high price for the knowledge he wrests from his teacher; he pays with his life, which is then only later restored to him. The content of the teaching is also unexpected. The teaching is a *subhāṣita*, a verse, but one of stunning simplicity. Its meaning seems so obvious that it is hard to believe that this was the object for which the future Buddha was willing to die. Surely something else must be at stake, and we are told in a modest way what that something might be: somehow, the encounter and the verse purify the seeker. The verse itself through its own inherent power, purifies the seeker's mind, and the death and resurrection at the hands of a teacher who may even prove to be a god in disguise, give the seeker a purer physical body. Here in these stories in which the future Buddha finds a master and receives instructions that we are told will lead to his salvation there is so much else happening that it almost seems that we would be remiss should we not ask just what is transmitted here from master to disciple and how. I should like in this paper to try to answer these questions by studying carefully these stories of the future Buddha's search for a teacher and the perfect teaching. I first examine two of the *avadānas* in which the Buddha is in search of a teacher, the *Subhāṣitagaveśin avadāna*, no. 53, in the *Avadānakalpalatā*, and the *Śibisubhāṣitagaveśin avadāna*, no. 91 in the same collection. I begin with a translation of these two texts followed by some discussion.

The quest of the future Buddha for the perfect teaching in these stories, while highly peculiar, and certainly nothing like the quest of

the historical Buddha in the standard Buddha biographies, nonetheless seems to me to have an identifiable context within Indian story literature. I therefore next turn in my discussion to what was surely one of the most famous quests in early Indian literature, Arjuna's search for the knowledge of the divine weapons that would save his life and the lives of the warriors in his faction in the impending war of the *Mahābhārata*. I hope to identify many of the same features as I noted in the future Buddha's quest: the teacher appears in a lowly guise, actually a disguise. The encounter between the would-be disciple and master is agonistic and the aspirant must show himself to be willing to give up his life for the knowledge that he seeks. The ultimate result of the quest is a virtual death and resurrection, after which the aspirant is prepared to accept and put to use the teaching and proceed on his chosen mission. The encounter is above all a ritual of humiliation and defeat and a test of courage.

Arjuna's encounter with Śiva, who is disguised as a hunter, would serve as one paradigm for later depictions of meetings between famous disciples and extraordinary masters. I turn next to a discussion of the meeting between the Vedānta philosopher Śaṅkara and his master, the legendary sage Vyāsa, that is vividly described in the late hagiography, the *Śaṅkaradigvijaya* attributed to Vidyāraṇya. Here too the encounter is agonistic and the master is in disguise. He appears as an outcaste, surrounded by dogs, the most unclean of animals. This should no longer surprise us though, for we have already seen the future Buddha find his master in a hunter and a demon, and Arjuna find his guide in a hunter. In the case of Śaṅkara, the student too is in disguise, since Śaṅkara is regarded in this text as an incarnation of Śiva and yet behaves here as a mere mortal, a young man in search of a spiritual guide.

The teaching imparted is simple and obvious, and once more we are compelled to seek beneath the surface to understand what is passing between master and disciple. In this section of the paper I will also examine Śaṅkara's own transmission of the teachings to his own disciples, for this too makes clear that the "transmission" of the teaching is not by any means just a normal process of teaching.

Finally I examine one other famous transmission, that between Yāmunācārya and Rāmānuja in two hagiographies of Rāmānuja, to support further my contention that in none of these well-known tran-

mission of the doctrine is there exactly a discursive exposition of the complicated religious teachings. Rāmānuja's encounter with Yāmuna is no less extraordinary than the future Buddha's dealings with the hunter or demon. For Yāmuna is dead by the time Rāmānuja finally meets him. The corpse displays three bent fingers and Rāmānuja intuitively understands their meaning. Thus passes the mantle of the doctrine from master to disciple.

My concluding section tries to draw together some common themes from this disparate material. It suggests further directions for future work and highlights some of the issues the discussion has raised.

II. The Buddha seeks the perfect words: Demons and hunters as the ideal master

I begin this section with translations of two *avadānas* from Kṣemendra's *Avadānakalpalatā*, a text that was composed in Kashmir in the 11th century A.D. Each *avadāna* deals with a past life of the Buddha and with a similar quest. The future Buddha in these two stories is in search of the perfect teaching, the perfect words or *subhāṣita*. The term *subhāṣita* or *sūkta* means many things; when it is directed to the form of a statement it may mean simply a phrase well spoken, and most particularly a finely crafted verse. It can refer as well to the content of a statement, and in this sense means "true words". Thus a Buddhist can call non-Buddhist teachings "*durbhāṣita*", "badly spoken", while the Buddhist teachings are "*subhāṣita*", well spoken. An analogous term occurs in the early formula of ordination, where the Buddhist doctrine or *dhamma* is described as *svākkhāta*, "well-told" (*Mahavagga* I.9.30). In the two *avadānas* I have translated here I rendered the term *subhāṣita* in its etymological sense, "well spoken", but it is clear from the way in which the term *subhāṣita* is used that what the future Buddha seeks is to be sure something well spoken in the sense of finely crafted, a good verse, but also well spoken in the second sense, meaning absolutely true¹. For the future Buddha refers to the verse as being the best path to

1. For some further comments on *subhāṣita* see Caillat 1984.

Nirvāṇa, the means to Enlightenment, and purifying of the soul. The two *avadānas* I have chosen differ greatly in style. The first is itself more of a *subhāṣita*, a finely crafted poem with ornate figures of speech and elaborate puns; in my translation I have tried to capture the sense without doing too much violation to the text². The second text is straightforward; it is simpler in style and builds on the very familiar story of king Śibi, the paradigm of generosity in Buddhist *avadāna* literature; who elsewhere gives his eyes away and as in the present account is then restored to wholeness.

There are other examples of the Buddha as seeker of well-spoken words (Panglung 1981, 177), including one in the *Avadānaśataka*, no. 38. The *Avadānaśataka* version is closest to the second text from the *Avadānakalpalatā*, in that the future Buddha seeks the perfect teaching and finds his teacher in a demon, really Indra in disguise. He must pay for it with his life, and as he is about to jump into a fire-pit, he utters a truth oath and the pit turns to a cool lotus lake. The future Buddha then propagates the teachings he has learned, having them carved onto gold plates that he sends throughout his realm. It is worth noting that these “teachings” are the most banal of the “teachings” in all the versions. What the future Buddha pays for with his life is this verse: “Practice the Dharma properly, not improperly. The person who practices the dharma well experiences happiness in this world and the next”.

The theme of the seeker of the truth, who must pay for the teachings with his life, also figured in the fictional lives of some of the bodhisattvas. At the conclusion of this section I will treat only one example of the bodhisattva in quest of the teaching, Sadāprarudita from the *Aṣṭasāhāsrika Prajñāpāramitā*. I conclude the section with some brief comments on the relationship of these *avadānas* to other stories of self-sacrifice in Buddhist literature.

2. In both of my translations, which are not intended as literal renderings of the text, I have striven above all for a self-sufficient and readable English text that is accessible to general readers as well as Indologists. This has meant that when a verse contained complicated word play I have tried to convey that word play directly in the translated verse instead of explaining the structure of the original in footnotes. It has also meant that in the few cases where a verse was somewhat difficult for me to construe I have done the best I can to convey the general sense of the verse in passable English.

A. *Subhāṣitagaveṣyavadāna*, No. 53

Wise men prefer these jewels: well spoken words to adorn the throat, the touch of their preceptor's feet as the crown to beautify their heads; holy words for their ears, and the eternal, stainless truth always on their lips. Ordinary folk find more pleasure in running after women with their costly finery, fancy necklaces of fine round pearls and the most perfect gemstones.

One day the Blessed One smiled and Śakra, knowing what was on his mind, asked him why. The Blessed One replied.

"Once there was a king of Benaras, named Seeker of well-spoken words". His glory was so radiant that it beamed forth, like a garland to adorn the Goddess of Fortune.

This king desired to adorn himself not with round pearls strung on a string to rest on his chest, but with well-spoken words, put into fine verse, having excellent qualities, words that would rest forever in the minds of discriminating wise men.

He gave generously from his treasury to all who were in need, but his wealth was never exhausted. And his fame, tied fast to him by the string of his virtues, wandered further and further afield.

That best of kings was surrounded by a host of most excellent poets, who could appreciate at once the sentiments of poetry, and he enjoyed the pleasure of his court that was filled with wise men, as a swan enjoys the pleasures of a lotus lake.

He instructed his subjects with well-spoken words of excellent qualities, and these well spoken words destroyed for them the darkness of their delusions, as lamp flames destroy physical darkness.

Now one day, when that clever king was in his court and the subject turned to the topic of well-spoken words, he addressed his chief minister, whose very name was "Clever".

"This court is resplendent with all of you, who have become known as good men and who are adorned with the ornament of virtue. Indeed my court is like the Goddess of Speech herself, for those very words with which I have

described you all can be applied to the Goddess of Speech as well: she is adorned by well-spoken words, in which all the rules of grammar are correctly followed and phrases are properly employed, and in which figures of speech and ornaments are well used.

But I wonder, have you found any new well-spoken words, rich in meaning that grows with time, like flowers properly mature and rich in nectar?

Indeed the stirrings of creative insight and the flourish of well-spoken words are best when they are new and fresh, like creepers that have just sprouted, delightful to the mind for their newness; they are all like the first ripening to maturity of a beautiful woman.

The bee wanders in the forest, ever eager for the taste of newer and fresher nectar, caring little for the sweetness it has just enjoyed. It goes further and further afield, caring little for what it has already tasted, even leaving behind the familiar clusters of flowers in full bloom, laden with pollen.

Well-spoken words, like jewels, once tested in this court, gain renown everywhere for their value.

Useless is the life of those men who have destroyed their minds for lack of learning. And learning is sterile, like the words repeated by a parrot, if it is unaccompanied by an ability to compose poetry, which can give rise to new and unique creations. And even lovely poetry, if it is not subjected to the scrutiny of connoisseurs who can judge its real merit, is like a lamp, hidden in a deep well with no one for whom it provides light.

Therefore I ask you to say something new. As spring prompts a cuckoo to sing, a friend stirs his companion to compose well-spoken words.

Words become charming, conquering all, lovelier even than the fragrance of jasmine, if even for an instant those who can appreciate them lend them their total attention.

Even if words possessed every virtue that should ensure their acclaim, they would fall flat as long as they did not get their proper hearing by being publicly recited. So it is with a friend, if he is ever excluded from one's confidence".

When he heard these words of the king, which were capable of touching the heart of wise men, the chief minister said this to the ruler of the earth.

"Oh king, your new verses, like your ever renewed glory, are sung everywhere in the universe, and to the exclusion of all else. Oh Lord of the Wise! What need is there now of any other well-spoken words, to add to your own?

Oh most honorable, since you are here, taking part in the enjoyment of learning and the arts, the whole world has become like a magical city of the vidyādhara, those demi-gods who have magical skills and are gifted in the arts.

Oh king, you are like the sun, making bloom the arts, which are like so many lotuses that the natural sun causes to bloom. And you are a friend to all the virtuous. Now that you reign in all your splendour, as the sun in the day time sky, all your subjects can follow the correct path that is thus illuminated for them.

A particular art, a sport, certain virtues, certain people and certain courses of action, all find favour in the popular imagination if the king, capable of knowing their worth, shows that he values such things.

When the king is wise, everyone takes delight in the joys of learning; when the king is courageous, the warriors all find pleasure in stepping onto the stage of battle; when the king is a fool, everyone acts stupid; when he is uncertain of what to do, everyone wavers, and when he is cruel everyone else too is vicious. Whatever the king does, his subjects all do too.

Only the merits of the subjects ensure that they have over them a king who is naturally wise. Such a king is like the spring, for if the spring nourishes the scent of excellent blossoms, the king knows the worth of the excellent men, who are like the flowers that adorn his court.

The people are honest and upright; the minister is clever; the king is learned and seeks the truth. These are all the visible propitious signs that indicate the time has come when merits have borne fruit.

The minds of the wise dance at every word, eager to fathom the true essence of poetry, while noble people make well-spoken words into ornaments for their ears, ensuring their success in this world.

The treasure house of poetry, famed everywhere, is never sealed shut but stays open for all to enjoy. From this we know that the king is celebrating his marriage to the ladies known as "wisdom" and "the arts", who have freely

chosen him as their lord. For at all wedding festivities there is dancing, the guests wear fine earrings, and money flows freely.

When the virtues of good men are everywhere displayed by the great honor the king accords them, then even hunters in the forests become greedy for the variegated charms of well spoken words.

There is a hunter named "Cruel One", who lives in the forests on the outskirts of your realm. Well-spoken words, new and fresh, like wonderful jewels, can always be had from him.

He takes from poets their well-spoken words, paying for them with pearls that proud lions with their claws have torn from the foreheads of the wild elephants".

Now when the king hears these words of his minister he dismissed his court and gave the courtiers leave to go. He went into his inner quarters and donned the disguise of a commoner.

In his search of well spoken words the king took with him a pearl necklace, the pearls of which seemed tied to each other by the rays that emanated from them, and that was magnificent, with its pearls like so many hosts of gleaming stars. With only his shadow as a companion, he went deep into the forest.

There the trees, bowing low with their blossoms gently shaken by the wind, seemed to welcome him. He searched carefully for that hunter and found him on the slope of a mountain, intent on killing some prey.

In his left hand the hunter held a bow, stretched into a circle. The bow was the destroyer of the pleasures of she- elephants; it was eager to consecrate does into a state of widowhood. Such a cruel bow the hunter bore, as cruel as his own heart.

And in his right, hand which was skilled in one art alone, the art of death, the hunter held an arrow, ever cruel to the creatures living in the forest. Such an arrow had put to death herds of elephants.

The hunter wore an upper garment of peacock feathers, that the wind contemptuously kept ruffling, and that looked like the eyes of the does that darted in fear, begging the hunter to spare the lives of their mates.

The king spoke words of honor to that hunter, as if he were the one who was worthy of honor. And that king, who was master over all his subjects and their proper teacher, bowed down to the hunter as if he were the king's master and teacher. And as he spoke, his white teeth were tinged with pink from his deed red lips.

"I have heard that you are ever vigilant in gathering well-spoken words. Give me some new jewel of a verse that shines like a lamp to teach people the path.

I shall pay you for it with this pearl necklace that puts to shame the whiteness of the moon with its own perfect lustre and destroys deep darkness. It will make the Goddess of Fortune smile upon you".

With these words the king showed to him the necklace that with its rays illuminated all the directions. And the hunter, seeing that treasure, which was beyond even his wildest dreams, thought to himself for a few moments.

"Even if this foolish one should give me this necklace, which should never be given away, afterwards he might think better of it and feel remorse at his deed. How can I arrange things so that I get this necklace after he is dead?".

After he had thought about this for a few moments, the hunter finally spoke. "Oh good man! I will give you the well-spoken words on one condition: if, once you have gotten the words, you at once throw your body off the top of this mountain".

Now when the king heard these cruel words of the hunter that were not at all out of character, he thought, "See how his past life and everything that he has done now conspire to compel him to such forbidden actions.

How different are the reputations and the real actions of wicked men. One might hear from afar of their supposed virtues, but one gets to experience directly their evil deeds.

He seems a miserable creature and yet he lives here in the forest. He takes the lives of living beings and yet seems drawn to the virtues of learning. He is a connoisseur of well-spoken words and yet is without compassion. Everything about this person's behavior seems warped by delusion.

He sings sweetly and seems like a holy man, living on fruits and nuts in the forest. But what is there to say of the greedy hunter, whose very virtues only serve to take the lives of innocent creatures?

Even if he exerts himself to acquire some special knowledge, the scoundrel is still wicked by nature. Snakes may sport jewels in their crowns, but they also carry a terrible cruel darkness in their anger.

A deceitful crooked person is never one over by teaching him religion. Garlic, even when rubbed with plenty of camphor, does not lose its natural stink”.

After the king, who was always seeking for good qualities, pondered these things for a long time, in his intense desire to hear some new teaching, he told the hunter, “Tell me those well spoken words. After I hear them I will kill myself by jumping from the mountain peak”.

When the hunter heard these words of that king, who was ever true to his promise, he took that necklace, which was like an abode of light rays. And then the hunter, ever addicted to wrong doing, further says “Take this in return”, and began to recite the well-spoken words.

“If you want the refuge of true happiness, never touch sin, which is like a curse that brings with it burning pain. One should take refuge in the abode of virtue, a structure raised high on morality, adorned by the lotus blossoms of merit. And as for the mind, which is greedy for pleasures of the senses that are ever inconstant, free that mind from desire and cause it to find its satisfaction in the true pleasure that is eternal.

This is the teaching of the Buddha, the lion throne of the kingdom of tranquillity. It keeps people from falling into misfortune and is an abode of virtue, open as a refuge to all. It puts an end to sensual desire and is a shield against the vicissitudes of transmigratory existence. It polishes the mirror of the mind and leads to the acquisition of merit”.

When the king has obtained these well-spoken words from that enemy of animals, he understood their essence and he fixed firm the meaning of those well-spoken words in his mind, a meaning which was pure and cleansed his soul. He climbed to the highest peak of the mountain, and abandoned his body. For men whose minds are filled with merit desire the truth and not the body which is doomed anyway to perish.

The king made a vow in his heart to save all living beings. And no sooner had he started to fall from the peak, than a demi-god named Vijaya, who lived there on the mountain, protected his body from the fall and the king safely landed on the earth.

The world shook, as if in amazement at such courage, and a rain of flowers fell from heaven. As the gods praised his act, the king then hastened to return to his capital.

The king, then, devoted to the welfare of all living beings, with those well-spoken words that contained the teachings, constantly turned people's minds to the eternal Dharma, that was a refuge from the dangers of transmigratory existence, and to good deeds.

In the meantime, that hunter made the rounds of the market place, desirous of selling the pearl necklace. He was taken for a thief, and trembling mightily at that rash seizure, he was brought by the kings' men to the king in his court.

The king, seeing him from a distance, with that gleaming pearl necklace clearly held in his hand, recognized that he was the hunter with whom he had made the agreement to die in exchange for the well-spoken words. He said, "This is my teacher, who taught me those well-spoken words in which the quality of tranquillity was manifest. He is worthy of honor from me". And he bowed down to the hunter and honored him and then let him go.

I was once that king called Subhāṣita, "Well-spoken Words", devoted to the truth, truthful, who had reached greatness by acquiring the treasure of perfect Enlightenment".

When he heard about the Blessed One's deeds as the Blessed One himself told them, the Lord of the Gods, his many eyes all wide open in wonder, took on the loveliness of a lotus pond with all its open blossoms.

B. *Śibisubhāṣitāvadāna*, No. 91

Well-spoken words, illuminating the True Path, act like an excellent lamp on a road without light. And because they are always of assistance, even to great men in their quest for right discrimination, they are always treasured.

Once the assembly of monks had been brought to the stage of perfection by the Blessed One, who sought the welfare of others, and who was then in the city of Kuśi, amongst the Mallas.

And as the monks were speaking gently to each other about the Dharma, the Blessed One happened to hear some well-spoken words and was extremely delighted.

When the monks saw how much the Blessed One loved those well-spoken words, they asked, "Oh Omniscient One, why do you take such delight in our words?"

And when he was asked this by the company of monks, the Blessed One, the Conqueror, replied, "Even in my past births I treasured well-spoken words".

Formerly in the city Śivavatī there reigned a king named Śibi. Out of compassion he treated all living beings as if they were his nearest and dearest relatives.

Heaven was filled with people who has followed his meritorious teaching. And when the king of the gods realized this he decided to go for himself and find out just what this Śibi was really like.

He approached the king, who was sitting in the top storey of his jewelled palace, and having taken the form of a demon, he stood before the king and said,

"All transmigratory existences are impermanent, vanishing like so many flashes of lightning. Everything is subject to birth, and whatever is subject to birth is prey to destruction and change".

Hearing these well-spoken words, which formed half of a longer verse, the king bowed to the demon, and with hands folded in reverence, he said,

"Oh sage! Tell me the other half of these well-spoken words, that bring delight to my mind. I shall become your disciple and hear from you words that will lead to Enlightenment".

And when the king had said these words with such humility, the demon replied, "Oh king! What would I do with you as a student? What do I need such a useless student for?"

I am overcome by hunger and thirst and my belly churns with violent pangs of hunger. I have no desire for the empty respect accorded a master.

Out of hunger and thirst I babble nonsense. I cannot tell you the rest of the verse. Please, don't trouble me any more.

Though they may be served up, well-spoken words, laden with sweetness, rich in emotion, cannot still hunger nor quench thirst. They bring joy only to one who is already satiated.

All of these things are only worth what they can bring a man to eat: sacred learning, songs, poetry, physical exertion, displays of marvels, knowledge of gems, the ability to get rid of madness, the ill effects of poison and possession by demons; even the service people give to kings, the efforts they spend to cross the ocean or make gold. All of these are nothing but a means to get food.

I am satisfied only with fresh meat and blood. And since you are bound by your vow not to harm living beings I won't get anything from you.

I go now to ask someone else. What will I gain by staying with you? Pleasantries are best exchanged between creatures who share the same taste in food and life style".

When the demon had completed his speech, the king respectfully told him, "I will give you my own flesh and blood, freshly cut from my own body.

Complete the other half of those well-spoken words on Independent Origination. Your well-spoken words are the best road to the city of Nirvāṇa".

And when the king had said this, the demon answered, "Listen, Oh wise one! And give me your promise".

"All transmigratory existences are impermanent, like so many flashes of lightning.

Everything is subject to birth, and whatever is subject to birth is prey to destruction and change.

For men who are exhausted by being whirled around in the vortex of transmigratory life and who are not in control of themselves, quiescence leads them to rest, by bringing to cessation the pursuit of sensory pleasures and false imaginings".

Hearing this, the king was delighted and his eyes were opened wide with pleasure. He cut his own flesh from his body and gave it to the demon, dripping with blood.

The king cut more and more flesh from his feet and the demon was amazed at how the king never even seemed to flinch.

The king gave the demon who craved meat that flesh and meat from his own limbs and he made a vow for the salvation of all living beings.

And then it was that Indra, who had taken the form of a demon, lovingly asked him, "Doesn't the physical pain that comes from cutting your vital parts cause you mental distress?"

When he was asked this by the king of the gods, the king of kings replied, "I feel no distress, for my body is being put to use for the sake of another living creature.

If it is true that I experience no distress in my mind at this bodily pain, then by that truth may my body be restored to its previous state, healthy and whole, without any wounds".

And as the lord of the earth said this, through the power of that truth suddenly his body assumed its former appearance, without any wounds.

The gods in the sky showered the king with a vast rain of flowers, and Indra, abandoning his disguise as a demon, praised him.

When Indra had seen the truth and had apologized to the king, he went on his way. And the king meditated on the well-spoken words that were as sweet as the nectar of the gods.

I was that king Śibi in my previous birth, and I so treasured well-spoken words that I was ready to risk my life for them".

When the monks heard the Tathāgata tell his own life story, they were all filled with amazement and praised him.

The person who loves well-spoken words is like a lamp to light the path that brings happiness both in this world and in the next. And when someone who

takes delight in savouring well-spoken words shares them with others he finds the highest pleasure. Even the Omniscient One becomes a suppliant, when the object of the yearning is well-spoken words. Therefore there is nothing more treasured by noble men than well-spoken words.

These two *avadānas* are about many things, one of which is clearly the search for a teacher and the transmission of some teaching. The first story tells us more about the search itself. In this story the search is not only a “spiritual” journey, but a real physical journey as well. During the course of this journey the king is physically separated from his court, which in many ways defines his royal status. The story spends considerable time in describing the court of the king and the king’s pursuit of the pleasures of literature. While this may seem at first to belong itself to the world of literary embellishment, I believe that the ornate verses describing the king as connoisseur of poetry have an important function in the story. They emphasize the radical nature of the king’s quest and the drastic loss of personal identity that his search involves. The king will go from the court to the forest in this story. In Sanskrit literature the forest is typically the antithesis of the urbane court of the king (Granoff 1989, 1990). The storyteller, then, makes clear the drastic nature of the change from king to anonymous seeker in the forest by describing the courtly setting so painstakingly. The king as arbiter of poetry, dedicated to the pleasure of the sense is a familiar topos in Sanskrit literature. Our storyteller is simply telling us that this king, too, was an exemplary king by the prevailing standards (Granoff in press).

The king as he begins his quest dons a disguise. We shall see that disguise of one sort or another is a recurring theme in these Buddhist stories of the transmission of teachings. In the present case I believe that the disguise is an indication that the king is losing his personal identity and that the journey can be understood as a loss and recovery of identity, similar to what is experienced in “rites of passage” or initiation rituals (van Gennep 1960; Turner 1969).

But the king and would be Buddha submerges his personal identity in an even more dramatic fashion than just by discarding his royal attire and leaving his court. To begin with he humbles himself before one of his subjects who belongs to the most abject social class in his

realm, a hunter. Hunters typically in Sanskrit literature are the epitome of everything that is profane, evil, and undesirable. Hunters do not know nor do they practice anything that remotely resembles dharma, broadly defined as both religion and law. Hunters live by taking life, which is a stark violation of Indian religious norms. They live beyond the pale of civilization, in the outlying forest. The *Purāṇas* are replete with stories of how wicked hunters are, and even the miracle stories of their redemption stress that they are the most abject sinners that can be imagined. Our king and future Buddha in discarding his royal garb and moving into the forest enters into a world in which the normal expectations are clearly violated. The sinner here becomes master of the Law, and the master, the upholder of the Law, become humble student.

It is worth noting that also in the standard biographies of the Buddha, the *Buddhacarita* (6) and the *Lalitavistara* (15.p.164) a divine being disguised as a hunter plays an important role in the renunciation of the Buddha. After the future Buddha has left the palace a hunter/god appears to him and gives him a proper monastic robe. He takes the prince's royal robes up to heaven where they are worshipped. This hunter in the standard Buddha biography plays a role similar to the hunter in the present *avadāna* about the Buddha in a past life in search of the teaching: both serve as agents for initiating the future Buddha into the religious life. In our story the hunter does so by giving the would-be Buddha the opportunity to sacrifice himself and by imparting to him a verse; in the Buddha biography the hunter gives to the future Buddha what is perhaps the most important of all the outward symbols of the religious career, the monastic robe (Kloppenbergh 1983, 164). In both cases the normal status hierarchy is reversed, when a royal figure humbles himself before a lowly hunter and accepts from him a particular gift.

Returning to the *avadāna*, however, we see that even after he has humbled himself before the hunter, the future-Buddha's renunciation of his identity and status is not yet complete. The hunter demands from his new pupil that he quite literally abandon everything connected with his former identity by discarding his body, that is, by killing himself. The body is the source of personal identity in Indian philosophy; it is the identification that an individual makes with his physical self that defines personal identity. The hunter asks of the would be Buddha that

he sacrifice that personal identity in exchange for the truth he will teach him. His request, of course, is framed in more mundane terms. The king has offered to pay for the teaching with a costly necklace and the hunter wants to be certain that he will make good on the offer; if the king is dead, he cannot demand the necklace back.

... The king agrees, but he is ultimately saved by a demi-god or *yakṣa*, who intervenes. The gods witness the miracle and celebrate the king's greatness. The king returns to his capital city and resumes his kingship. Reintegrated into his previous identity, in the language of rites of passage, the king continues his life. But something has changed. Now, instead of cultivating poetry, he spreads the message of the Buddhist teaching. The secular court has become a center for propagating religious teaching.

It remains now to examine in more detail the nature of that "teaching" and exactly what happened when the hunter/master conveyed his message to the king/disciple. It is important to remember that the king in his court is the cultured man par excellence; everything associated with learning in classical India is centered around the court. Even abstruse philosophical debates take place in the court and the king is the final arbiter on matters of religion. It seems a valid question to ask what if anything the hunter could teach the king. When we look at the actual teachings we find a relatively innocuous verse condemning sin and praising merit. The hunter explicitly adds that it represents the "teaching" of the Buddha. Were we to read this story asking that it obey strictly the dictates of normal reasoning, I think we could only be surprised that the learned king should be willing to die for so obvious a statement, that sin is bad and good deeds are good. Indeed the king as the king, whose function it was to punish the bad and support the good, must know that well. And yet the storyteller tells us that the king treasured the verse the hunter gave him, meditated on it in his heart and found it both pure, *vimala* and "cleansing of his soul", *ātmasaṃśodhana*. (vs. 52). I would like to argue that the "transmission" of the teaching in this story is something not rational and something that has very little to do with the actual intellectual content of the teaching itself. It has more to do with the process of self-abandonment that the quest represents, and with an encounter with a "master" that further accentuates loss of self-identity and rever-

sal of normal values. It is a radical and agonistic encounter between master and disciple, in which the disciple is ritually humbled, even humiliated, and “killed” and resurrected in a new and purified self. To support my reading I turn to the second *avadāna*, which I think makes all of this much clearer.

In the second story we learn far less of the “search” and far more about the last part of the process, the “death” and “resurrection”. In this story the search does not involve a physical journey for the seeker; the king remains in his palace, and the god Indra comes in disguise as a demon to test him. Indeed the king is not really described as a “seeker”; but rather as someone who appreciates fine words when he hears them. He is lolling about in comfort when the demon comes to him and recites half a verse, perhaps in imitation of the popular sport of capping verses in kings’ courts (Granoff 1994b). Now the king’s curiosity is aroused, and he asks for the second half of the verse. The demon refuses. He says he is hungry and needs meat and blood to eat. The king has a reputation for non-violence and so is unlikely to give him his proper meal. And so he prepares to depart.

We see here the same contrast between king-student/non-violence/upholder of the law and demon-master/violent/criminal as we saw between the king and the hunter in the first story. The king now himself offers to feed the demon by giving him his own flesh and blood in return for the rest of the verse. The demon agrees and the king proceeds to cut himself up. The demon notices that the king does not seem tormented by the physical pain he is inflicting on himself and asks about this. The king recites an oath of truth and is restored to his former wholeness, his wounds healed. Indra reveals himself, discarding his disguise, and the king contemplates the verse he has learned, which was as “sweet as the nectar of the gods”.

One might argue that the “teachings” imparted here are perhaps slightly more sophisticated than those of the first story. We do get some terms that are arguably technical terms, *upaśama* or quiescence, *nirōdha* or cessation, that I have further glossed in my translation. But the central event of the story is still not the “teachings” but the ultimate price paid for them: the willing self-mutilation and the restoration to health. I think it is also important to note that the restoration takes place not through the teaching that is imparted, but through a

vow the king makes, to save all living beings, and through his truth oath. The truth oath again pertains to his self-inflicted pain: the king denies that he has experienced any mental agony as a result of the pain. What is transmitted from master to disciple is not so much the “teaching” as an opportunity, an occasion, for the would be disciple to humble himself, abandon his personal identity and be wounded and purified in the process.

The fact that the emphasis in these stories is on the abandonment of self and restoration to new perfection should I think alert us to their wider context. There are numerous *avadānas* that describe the future Buddha’s self-sacrifice. These *avadānas* of the search for the teaching belong with other stories of self-sacrifice as preparation for the religious quest³. The theme of self-sacrifice becomes part of the ritual formula in later texts such as the *Sādhnamālā*, where the aspirant before he undertakes a ritual, pronounces himself ready and willing to abandon life and limb for the teaching (*Sādhnamālā*, vol. 1, p. 65). The same theme also dominates certain citations in the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, for example from a text entitled *Āryagaganagañjasūtra* (*Śikṣāsamuccaya*, chapter 3, p. 45). I will return to this observation in my conclusions.

The version of the king searching for the perfect teaching that is found in the *Avadāna Śataka*, cited earlier, has both quest motif and final self-sacrifice equally emphasized. The king finds his master in Indra, disguised as a demon. He humbles himself before him, agrees to commit suicide and is saved by a truth oath that is the exact counterpart of the one we have just seen. In this version as well, the “teachings” are of less consequence than the willingness to sacrifice oneself, the vow made to save all creatures, and the truth oath.

3. One of my students, Ren Yuan, is preparing a full length study of these *avadānas* in Sanskrit and Chinese for her Ph. D. thesis. There she notes the theme of paying for a verse with one’s life from the *Mahāvastu*. I have written about the relationship between the imagery of one such *avadāna*, the *Mañicūḍāvadāna*, and the language of the sacrifice in Hindu ritual texts (Granoff 1990). I was unaware at that time of Francois Bizot’s fascinating study of the *paṇsukūl* ritual in Cambodia and Southeast Asia, in which he notes the close parallels between the symbolism of this Buddhist ritual which involves the language of death and dismemberment and rebirth, and the Brāhmaṇical sacrifice (Bizot 1981, 76; 94ff). There is also a thesis by REIKO OHNUMA, *Dehadāna: The “Gift of the Body” in Indian Buddhist Narrative Literature*, University of Michigan 1997.

Variants of the quest for the perfect teaching also appear in the *avadāna* literature. The *Avadānakalpalatā* 69, *Dharmarājikāvadāna* tells of an old and unlettered monk, who partakes of a royal feast along with other monks. The younger monks tease him, telling him that the king has so honored him because he believes the elderly monk must be wise with all his years and he wants to hear a *subhāṣita* from him. The old monk in his simplicity panics, and a goddess must come to his aid. She teaches him a *subhāṣita*, which is strikingly simple in content. It tells how money should be used for pious deeds, food should be taken in measure only to sustain the body, and sleep should be just enough to restore strength. A person should abandon anything in excess of these things, which can bring no benefit. The king is delighted with this verse, which he feels applies specially to him. For his part, the monk is further instructed by the goddess, and practicing meditation he achieves arhatship. What this story retains of the pattern seems clear: the *subhāṣita* is conveyed by an inappropriate teacher, here an unlettered monk. It is transmitted to the monk to begin with through supernatural means, and its intellectual content is minimal. Its effectiveness is in the reaction it arouses in the listener: the king understands from the general verse a special message which he feels was intended for himself. As in the other accounts, the “transmission” of the teaching has little to do with any ordinary processes of learning.

Another variant of the search for the perfect verse of *subhāṣita* can be found in the *Śuddhodanāvadāna*, no. 107, of the *Avadānakalpalatā*. Here the Buddha in his past life was a merchant named Śuddhodana, who had ventured as far as Ratnadvīpa, the “Isle of Jewels”, and returned with marvellous treasures. He presents a magnificent necklace to the king, and as he is leaving the palace he hears the princess recite a *subhāṣita*. Suddenly the young man loses all interest in worldly pursuits and become obsessed with hearing from her another *subhāṣita*. He stops sleeping and yearns for such a verse, which he says, “seems to yield the nectar of the gods, even if one does not reflect upon its meaning”. He finds all the jewels he has amassed over the last twelve years to be of no value when compared with her verses. The princess, too, seems well aware of the value of her words, for she then demands of the young man all of his wealth as payment for a single verse that she agrees to impart to him. The verse

she tells him is simple, as we might by now have expected. It says that all happiness in this life, all accomplishment and all pleasure unsullied by desire, all these things are the result of merit. The king is astonished when he hears that the young man has bought such a verse with so much wealth, but the young man assures him that it was well worth the price he has paid for it. The young man has the verse inscribed on gold plates and circulated throughout the kingdom. The story ends with the Buddha explaining that he was this young man in the past, while Śāriputra was the princess.

I find this simple story particularly significant in the context of the present discussion, because it makes explicit that the verse or *subhāṣita* that is so sought after functions in a mode that is other than that of normal intellectual discourse. The young man in our story clearly states that the verse seems to yield the nectar of the gods, *amṛta*, even if it remains unanalyzed by any process of discursive reasoning: *aparyālocitena* (verse 11). What is valued is something other than the discursive meaning of the teaching, a fact that all of stories tell us in one way or another, not least of all by making the content of the verses so obvious and simple.

To conclude this section I would like now to turn to one more Buddhist story of a search for the teachings before I begin to examine some non-Buddhist accounts. This is the story of Sadāprarudita Bodhisattva from the *Aṣṭasāhāsrika Prajñāpāramita*, chapter 30.

Sadāprarudita's story in this text is the paradigm of how one should seek the teaching. The text tells us that one should seek the teaching exactly as Sadāprarudita did: without regard for his body and without regard for his life. Sadāprarudita's longing for the teaching is said to be so strong that it can best be compared to the way in which a parent laments for a son who has just died (p. 240). Like the king in our first *avadāna*, Sadāprarudita must journey to find his master and the teaching. He reaches a city that is described in glowing terms. There he gains a vision of the Buddhas. During the vision he is told that Dharmodgata will be his master. Sadāprarudita wonders what he can pay Dharmodgata as the appropriate fee or *dakṣiṇā* due a teacher. He decides as he goes along that he should sell his body and with the money he gets he can purchase something suitable to with which he will pay Dharmodgata. Indra decides to test Sadāprarudita and comes

to him asking for his blood, bones, heart and marrow that he says his father needs for a sacrifice. Indra is pleased with Sadāprarudita's willingness to give him his body and reveals himself to him. He tells Sadāprarudita to make a truth oath that will heal him. Sadāprarudita asks for the Buddha's teachings, but Indra says that he is unable to give them to him. As the text goes on we learn more of Sadāprarudita's quest. It offers him a second opportunity to sacrifice himself. Dharmodgata has been in meditation for seven years, during which time he has ignored his would-be disciple, who paces or stands before the teacher, in an act of umility in that the disciple refuses to sit in the master's presence. The teacher is about to come out of his meditative state and preach. Sadāprarudita searches for water to use to wet the area and keep the dust down, but Māra has caused all the water to dry up. Sadāprarudita cuts himself and uses his own blood to dampen the earth. Indra turns the blood into divine sandal wood paste.

The story of Sadāprarudita describes a search for the Buddhist teaching that exhibitis many similarities to the quest in the *avadānas*. I would single out particularly the journey itself, which like the journey of the king into the forest involves a separation from normal identity and offers finally the opportunity for the ultimate gesture of self-abandonment. Sadāprarudita like the king/seeker must also humble himself before the teacher, by waiting seven years for him to be ready to preach. The transmission of the teaching in this text, too, involves a long period of preparation in which the aspirant is willing to "die" and be reborn as an indication of his readiness to receive the teaching. I believe that these are typical features in non-Buddhist accounts of "transmission" of the teaching and that they are essential to the transmission if not its very essence. I turn now to one of the most famous transmission stories in early Indian religious literature, the account of Arjuna's search for magical weaponḡ in the *Mahābhārata*.

III. Arjuna's Quest: Death and Resurrection as the Preparation for the Transmission

Arjuna's quest is for magic weapons and the spells (mantras) that control them. It was described in the *Araṇyakaparvan* of the

Mahābhārata, chapters 37-45, and was the subject of numerous representations in art and several major later poetic works⁴. Arjuna's journey has much in common with the quest our would-be Buddhas undergo in the *avadānas* discussed above. It is a real physical journey that will take him out of his normal setting and into the world of the gods. It also involves masters and gods in disguise: Arjuna first meets Indra, disguised as a holy man, resting under the foot of a tree. Indra demands that Arjuna abandon his identity as a warrior, for he orders him to put down his weapons. At first Arjuna refuses, and so Indra reveals himself and offers him a boon. Arjuna replies to Indra as Sadāprarudita had, by asking for a boon Indra cannot give. Sadāprarudita had asked for the Buddhist teachings; Arjuna asks for magic weapon. Indra tells him that he will get the weapons after he sees Śiva.

Arjuna must continue his journey. It is in the forest that he meets his master, the god Śiva, who is disguised as a hunter. They fight and Arjuna loses. He is sorely wounded in the fight. Śiva reveals himself to Arjuna and touches him. This is how the text describes what happens:

«All that was impure in Arjuna's body was at once destroyed as soon as Arjuna was touched by the Three-eyed God. Śiva spoke to Arjuna, saying, "Go now to heaven". And thus granted permission by Śiva, Arjuna bowed down to the god, touching his head to Śiva's feet, and then with his hands folded in reverence, he looked at Śiva» (41.23-24).

It is interesting to see what later authors make of this divine contest and divine touch. In the *Mahābhārata Campū* of Anantakavi Śiva's touch cures Arjuna's wounds and soothes his pain (Chapter 4, p. 194), much as Śibi's wounds are magically healed. In the *Kirātārjunīya* of Bhāravi Indra embraces Arjuna and promises that he and Śiva along with the other gods will give Arjuna divine strength. As he fights with Śiva Arjuna is repeatedly likened to Śiva; it is as if during or through the means of the fight Arjuna is taking on this new

4. For a detailed discussion of the encounter between Arjuna and Śiva see Scheuer 1982, 221-223 and 233. I am indebted to Professor Klaus Bruhn for this reference. Scheuer draws the specific comparison between the encounter, death and rebirth and the language of the consecration or *dīkṣā* that I will make later. He speaks, however, in terms of consecration for battle and the sacrificial battle of the *Mahābhārata* war. I believe that the paradigm is a more general one, applicable more broadly to "transmission" of teaching in diverse religious stories in India.

divine identity. Finally, we find this poetic description of what it is that Śiva does to Arjuna through their fight:

“Once Tvaṣṭṛ has sculpted the orb of the sun in heaven with the blows of his chisel. Now Śiva seemed to sculpt a body for Arjuna, with every blow of his weapons, while Arjuna stood there ablaze with the light of his valor and might, resting firmly in his courage, that was as stainless as the pure heaven”.

Arjuna is compared to the sun, ablaze with his valor and might, qualities that are regularly associated with light or *tejas* in Sanskrit literature. And Śiva is compared to Tvaṣṭṛ, the architect of the gods, who in early mythology actually made the sun. The fight with Śiva, then, is said to give Arjuna a new and radiant body, aglow like the sun. Arjuna is then ready for his journey to heaven and the actual gift of the weapons.

This motif of divine touch as the essential act of “transmission” recurs in a late Vaiṣṇava text from Assam, connected not so much with the transmission of teaching but with the transmission of authority. In the *Vaṁśīgopāladever Caritra* of Rāmānanda Dvija when Vaṁśīgopāla feels his death coming and decides to appoint his successor, he rubs his own body and then touches the head of his disciple, saying,

“My ascetic force (*tejas*), strength (*bala*), power (*śakti*) and everything else I now place in your body” (verse 832).

It seems clear that the concept of transmission as empowerment and transfer of a physical substance was to have a long history that cut across religious boundaries in India.

Returning now to Arjuna’s quest, I suspect that many aspects of the hero’s search should seem familiar to us. The quest involves a journey and a meeting with a master, who is a god in disguise. The meeting is agonistic and the seeker must be willing to risk his life. Wounded, he is restored to health, and even more, he is given a new purified body. The story of Arjuna goes on, where the *avadānas* stopped with the fight, death and restoration, which were intimately tied with the transmission of the desired knowledge.

These basic outlines of the quest for knowledge as agonistic encounter in which personal identity is dissolved and newly created are familiar from other accounts in Sanskrit literature. In the *Raghuvamśa* Raghu's son Aja must defeat a wild elephant before he can get magic weapons and the formulas that control them (5.43ff). The elephant is also in disguise, so to speak; he is a cursed celestial being.

There is another place in the *Mahābhārata* when Arjuna seeks the divine weapon from Śiva. This is the *Droṇa Parvan*, 7.57-58 of the critical edition. This time Arjuna makes the journey in a dream. Arjuna fears that he will not be able to fulfil his promise to kill the mighty Jayadratha. Kṛṣṇa comes to him and tells him to seek the Pāśupata weapon from Śiva. And then in the last moment of the night, the first instant of the morning, the *brāhma muhūrta*, he actually sees himself floating in heaven with Kṛṣṇa (7.57.20). Their journey to Śiva's abode is poetically described in the next series of verses. Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa are told by Śiva to claim the weapons from a lake. They find the lake guarded by two fearsome *nāgas* or snakes, whom they subdue with sacred words (7.57.68-72). The two heroes eventually learn the spells that control the weapons and their proper use not from Śiva himself, but from his alter-ego, a dark-skinned, wild-looking ascetic figure who emerges from Śiva, a counterpart to the god in disguise in our other stories. Here, too, then, we have some of the same basic motifs: transmission of knowledge involves a journey and a combat, and the teacher is someone totally unexpected⁵.

I believe that these accounts make clear that there is a wider context for the Buddhist *avadānas* of the search for the teaching. There existed in early Indian literature, in the *Mahābhārata*, for example, a

5. The encounter with the god in disguise in the *Mahābhārata* may not always involve the transmission of the teaching. In the *Aśvamedhika parvan*, chapter 54, Uttanka wins a boon from Kṛṣṇa that the god will supply him with water wherever he asks, even in the driest desert. Uttanka finds himself in need of water one day and remembers Kṛṣṇa, but instead of the glorious god he sees before him an outcaste surrounded by dogs. He refuses water from the outcaste's hands, only to learn later that he has rebuffed the God Indra. Indra has agreed to provide Uttanka with *amṛta*, the drink of immortality, but only if Kṛṣṇa permitted him to do so in the form of an outcaste. Uttanka is tested in this episode, but he does not gain any special wisdom from the encounter. Instead he gets a new boon from Kṛṣṇa, the promise of rain in the desert, from clouds known by his name.

clear understanding of a search for special knowledge. The search involved conflict with a master, who was a god in disguise. The conflict served to purify the aspirant so that he is able to complete the journey and accept the divine teaching when it comes. Of all our Buddhist stories, perhaps the account of Sadāprarudita comes closest to this paradigm, for the self-sacrifice precedes the teaching in the *Aṣṭasāhāsrika*, as it does in the story of Arjuna. The *avadānas*, by contrast, seem to tie the transmission of the teaching and the self-sacrifice so closely together that the self-sacrifice seems to be the meaning of the teaching: what is given by the master is this unusual opportunity for the seeker to purify himself. His religious career really follows from this purification, rather than from the teaching that has been conveyed. But despite the differences, these stories all seem somehow to be variations on a common theme. That there were other possible variations is clear from the next stories that I discuss, accounts of Śaṅkara's receipt of the teachings and his further passing them on to his own disciples in the *Śaṅkaradigvijaya* ascribed to Vidyāraṇya.

IV. Śaṅkara meets his master: the guru as outcaste

Despite the fact that Śaṅkara is regarded as an incarnation of Śiva, the original source of all knowledge, the *Śaṅkaradigvijaya* nonetheless describes this human incarnation as acting very human: he must seek a teacher and situate himself in a received line of transmission (5.102). The line of transmission is described as beginning with Vyāsa (5.104), whose authority derives from Śiva himself (5.157). Śaṅkara meets Vyāsa, but he also meets Śiva directly. I begin from the encounter with Śiva. As we might have expected from all of the stories told thus far, Śiva is in disguise. He appears to Śaṅkara as a *caṇḍāla*, an outcaste, surrounded by dogs. Dogs are the most unclean of animals and the *caṇḍāla* is the most unclean of human beings. Like the hunter, the *caṇḍāla* is beyond the pale; ignorant, violent by nature, totally cut off from Brahmanical teaching and excluded from ritual and sacred knowledge. That a *caṇḍāla* should serve as a master to transmit the teaching must tell us something very important about the nature of that "transmission" and what is being transmitted. Śaṅkara at first fails to reco-

gnize in the *caṇḍāla* the god Śiva. He rudely tells the *caṇḍāla* to get off the road. The *caṇḍāla* begins to instruct Śaṅkara, telling him that it is nonsense for a brahmin to scream at the *caṇḍāla* and tell him to clear the way. The very idea that one is a *caṇḍāla* and the other a brahmin is based on a false sense of personal identity, a false identification of the body with the soul. Śaṅkara at once realizes his mistake, bows to the *caṇḍāla* and proclaims that he will accept anyone who knows as his master regardless of caste (6.37). The god reveals himself to Śaṅkara and the text makes clear what Śaṅkara actually gets from the encounter; he gets the ability to compose his works⁶.

It seems to me possible to find in this account of “transmission” several of the features we have already identified. First, the seeker comes upon a master in disguise. The disguise is a radical one, in that the master appears as someone whom one would least expect to regard as a master. In addition the encounter is agonistic and its ultimate result is that the seeker abandons his ordinary self-identity, here not through death but through an understanding that personal identity is a false concept. What is transmitted through the encounter is this radical self-reappraisal, which grants the aspirant some special power. Here it is the ability to compose the philosophical texts Śaṅkara will author, while for the would-be Buddha the process was more simply described as “purifying”.

Śaṅkara will also meet Vyāsa, but in a far less dramatic scene (chapter 7). But Vyāsa is still in disguise, this time as a Brahmin and we are reminded that there is something about the transmission of teaching that is unusual. Śaṅkara engages in a contest with Vyāsa, so that we see once more that the encounter between master and disciple is still agonistic. Śaṅkara’s disciple Padmapāda recognizes Vyāsa in the brilliant Brahmin and the encounter ends.

While this meeting between Śaṅkara and his master is only slightly out of the ordinary, Śaṅkara’s own transmission of the teachings

6. There is a related episode in the biography of the Vedānta philosopher, Vidyāranya, in which Vidyāranya meets Vyāsa, who is disguised as an outcaste. For some discussion on this in a political context, see Wagoner 1993, 43. Wagoner calls the episode a narrative of empowerment; I have tried to put it in the larger context of the many stories about transmission of the teaching told across India’s religious boundaries.

downward to his students is a bit more peculiar. We are told that Śaṅkara, seated under a fig tree, a youngster surrounded by old men, gave no discourse. "Silence was his discourse, and the students, who also said nothing, had all the sprouts of their doubts cut down (6.17)". One commentator added that this is a reworking of a popular verse:

"Strange it was, under that fig tree. The disciples were old men and the master was a youth. Silence was his discourse that stilled the doubts in the disciples' minds".

Clearly there is something odd about this "transmission" of the teaching. What is transmitted is the removal of doubt. Doubt and wrong knowledge are regarded as "impurities". We are clearly back in the realm of the encounter between master and disciple such as Arjuna experienced, where the touch of the master destroyed all the impurities in his body.

The attitude of the *Śaṅkaradigvijaya* towards the transmission of teaching is not, however, exhausted by these descriptions of unusual encounters between a would-be disciple and a master. It is worth pausing for a moment to reflect on what Śaṅkara obtained from his meeting with Śiva, who was disguised at that point as an outcaste. Śaṅkara gets from the meeting the ability to compose a commentary on the *Brahmasūtra*. The *Śaṅkaradigvijaya* is explicit about why commentaries are needed at all: although scriptural texts exist, people fail to understand them correctly (5.156). Furthermore, the text tells us that it is not just a written text of a commentary that removes the doubts about scriptural interpretation; there is also the need for the proper transmission of scriptural interpretation through an unbroken lineage of transmission, known under the technical term *saṃpradāya*. If Śaṅkara received from his encounter with Śiva some supernatural ability to compose his commentary, he is also elsewhere in this same text described as having followed the more mundane practice of seeking out a teacher who stood in such a received line of transmission or *saṃpradāya*. This teacher was Govindanāthe, whom Śaṅkara found in a cave (5.102). We are also told that Śaṅkara learned the entire meaning of the sacred texts as transmitted in the lineage beginning with the sage Vyāsa, and passing from Vyāsa to his son Śuka,

from Śuka to Gauḍapāda and from Gauḍapāda to Govindanāthe (5.105) Śaṅkara, as he ends his study under Govindanāthe, is pained by the impending separation from his teacher, who “purifies him with his glance” (5.163), reminding us of the extraordinary processes that take place in such meetings.

I have mentioned Śaṅkara’s study under Govindanāthe because it seemed important to call attention to the fact that while radical ritualized encounters between a master and would-be disciple are emphasized in the story literature, the Indian philosophical and religious tradition also had a more down to earth understanding of “transmission” of the teaching in an unbroken lineage of teachers⁷. A study of the exact historical relationship between these two concepts of “teaching” remains for the future. While I surmise that the conscious construction of lineages and the emphasis on transmission of a discursive body of knowledge through a *saṃpradāya* is a later adaptation of earlier more magical understandings of transmission, at this stage in my research I only wished to note that within a single text like the *Śaṅkaradigvijaya* we clearly see both models, despite their inherent mutual incompatibility⁸.

I would like to turn to one other late biography of a philosopher to stress that the “transmission” of the teaching was often a trans-rational affair in which either nothing is said or what is said is of little consequence and yet something radical happens to the pupil. In the biography of Rāmānuja, Rāmānuja is regarded as in a direct line of transmission from Yāmunācārya. And yet oddly enough, Rāmānuja never meets Yāmunācārya, at least not while Yāmuna is still alive. Rāmānuja sees only the corpse of his would be master, and a corpse seems to be as improbable a teacher as a hunter or outcaste or demon. But this corpse does teach Rāmānuja. The corpse has three of the fingers on one hand all bent out of shape. In one version of the biography Rāmānuja directly intuites the exact message that each finger has to convey. As he states

7. Perhaps the most useful introduction to the concept of *saṃpradāya* or transmission of teaching through an unbroken lineage can be had from the very late text, *Satsiddhāntamārtanda*, a Vaiṣṇava polemical text of the 19th century A.D.

8. As Patrick Ollivelle reminded me at the AAR panel November 19, 1995, where I presented some of this material, the tradition of the “inappropriate” master goes back in Hinduism to accounts like that of Raikva in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*.

their implication, the fingers uncurl (Prapannāmṛta, p. 17, vs 67). The story is told slightly differently in other versions of the biography, but the underlying theme remains the same: even a corpse can “transmit” the teaching (*Rāmānujacampū*, chapter 5, p. 64).

Transmissions of the teaching occur in many different ways just in these few texts, and the true master can be almost anyone or anything, from corpse to outcaste to Brahmin. What is important across these differences, though, is that the transmission is an encounter between master and disciple that is out of the ordinary, and that what the disciple gains is not a body of discursive knowledge that is given to him as such, but a power to know or a sudden illuminating insight. It is worth noting that in these accounts there is far less emphasis on death and rebirth than in the Buddhist stories, an observation which may help us to understand the unique context and significance of the Buddhist stories. At the same time the similarities must not be overlooked: in Buddhist and non-Buddhist stories transmission is a ritualized contest between a master and a disciple, usually involving the humiliation of the disciple and, with the exception noted in the *Śaṅkaradigvijaya*, virtually never involving the actual transmission of a recognized body of knowledge. In my concluding remarks I ask what models there were in Indian culture for such an encounter between master and disciple that was at once terrifying in its ability to destroy the very identity of the disciple and purifying and ennobling at the same time. I also attempt to understand the singular Buddhist emphasis on death and rebirth as the central act for the disciple.

V. Conclusions: The Transmission of the teachings as *dīkṣā*

There has been considerable work on the *dīkṣā* in ancient and classical India (Gonda 1965; Heesterman 1957; Hillebrandt 1917; Hoens 1965). Like the seeker for the perfect teaching, the individual undergoing the *dīkṣā* or consecration for the Vedic sacrifice separates himself from his ordinary life and his social identity. Much of the symbolism of the texts is of death and a rebirth. Even more relevant to the present study, in some texts it is said that the *dīkṣita* is furnished with a new body (Gonda 1965, p. 335ff), much as Śibi was given a healthy body

for his now wounded one, or Arjuna had his wounds healed and the impurities taken from his body after his encounter with Śiva.

The language of *dikṣā* as a purifying process and a death and rebirth is continued in later Hindu ritual texts (Davis 1991; Brunner 1963). In the *Kulārṇava Tantra*, chapter 14, *dikṣā*, which involves the transmission of a *mantra*, is described in language that is familiar to us from the Buddhist stories of seeking the perfect knowledge. The encounter between the master and would-be disciple is purifying; by the mere glance of the guru or by his touch, the disciple is endowed with knowledge (55-56); through a process of meditation the guru reconstructs for the disciple a divine body (42ff). The text also prescribes a period when the master and disciple must test each other (19-22). The master is even supposed to abuse the disciple, beating him, humiliating him, pretending to be indifferent to him, while the disciple is to look on all of this abuse as a manifestation of the teacher's compassion. It seems possible to see in the indifference of the future Buddha's chosen masters, whether the hunter or the demon, just such a test, but with one difference that I would like to suggest is highly significant. If the guru in the *Kulārṇava Tantra* is to humiliate the disciple, and if the disciple is to undergo a ritual "death" and "rebirth", this all still seems mild compared to the real physical violence that the future Buddha is said to experience in the stories of seeking for the perfect teaching. I would like to argue that while the Buddhist *avadānas* of seeking the perfect teaching do indeed make use of some of the symbolic world and the language of the *dikṣā*, they do so in what was a well-defined and specifically Buddhist context. This context was the story literature of the *jātakas* and *avadānas*, mentioned earlier in this paper, which describes the future Buddha as sacrificing his body. In this hypothesis, rituals of transmission, which share many of the characteristics of initiation rituals classified under the general category *dikṣā*, have been modified in the Buddhist stories to conform to a broad ritual pattern of self-sacrifice that seems to have played a singularly important role in Buddhist literature.

The origins and ultimate meanings of the theme of self-sacrifice in Buddhism have been studied from several perspectives (Ohnuma 1997; Granoff 1990). The language of self-sacrifice in these Buddhist stories has close parallels to the language of the sacrifice of life expected of a

king and warrior in the *Mahābhārata*. In the *Śānti parvan* we are told again and again *ātmatyāga*, self-sacrifice, and *sarvabhūtānukampā*, “compassion towards all living beings” are two of the virtues expected of a *ksatriya* or warrior (12.64.26). Another verse tells us that the best of men abandon their bodies; this is the way of kings (*sarvaśreṣṭho yaḥ śarīraṃ tyajeta/nityaṃ tyaktaṃ rājadjarṃeṣu sarvaṃ*) (12.65.3). The preceding verse has just declared that a king should know that his highest duty is to show compassion to all living beings and to abandon his body in battle (*vidyād rājā sarvabhūtānukampāṃ dehatyāgaṃ cāhave dharmam agryam*). The parallel with the language of Buddhist texts and particularly these Buddhist stories of self-sacrifice is so striking that it cannot be accidental. Buddhism speaks often in the language of the warrior; passions are enemies that must be destroyed; the quest for salvation is often described in the same language used to describe a battle. But if the stories of self-sacrifice can be seen as one more example of Buddhist use of the language and imagery of war, we are still left to ponder the longevity and tenacity of these stories in the Buddhist tradition, features that suggest that even if the language of self-sacrifice is part of a larger reliance on the language of battle, these stories came to have a special significance for the Buddhist tradition.

There are indications that it was not only in their story literature that the paradigm of the Buddha’s self-sacrifice was important. In his discussion of the *paṇsukūl* ritual in Cambodia and Southeast Asia, during which monks receive their robes, Francois Bizot ultimately drew a close connection between this Buddhist ritual with its symbolism of death and rebirth, Brāhmanical rituals of consecration or *dikṣā*, and the stories of self-sacrifice in Buddhist literature. Bizot further noted the funerary context of the *paṇsukūl* and related funerary customs in which the dead body is ritually dismembered or skinned and the bodily parts are left for animals to eat in a ritual reenactment of the sacrifices of the future Buddha that are recounted in so many of the *jātakas* and *avadānas* (Bizot 1981, 76; 94ff). Here in the *paṇsukūl*, then, we have an actual ritual that reflects the complex and multivalent system of meanings that I have tried to reconstruct as underlying several Buddhist stories of the transmission of the teaching. In any case it seems to me to be clear that the accounts of the transmission of the teaching studied in this paper go beyond the

depiction of transmission as an agonistic and extraordinary encounter that I have adduced as parallels from non-Buddhist texts. The Buddhist stories demand not just the ritual humiliation and subjugation of the subject and not just the student's renunciation of one identity in favor of another: they seem to demand the actual physical death and rebirth of the-seeker. With this demand, the stories of transmission may be seen to join a larger body of stories in Buddhism, the many *avadānas* that describe the self-sacrifice of the Buddha.

Much remains to be done on this basic pattern in Buddhist ritual, its extent and its significance, questions that would take me well beyond the confines of this limited study. I would only say this much at this stage of my own knowledge: the contexts for the Buddhist stories of seeking the teaching that I have studied here would seem to be multiple. Buddhist stories of seeking the perfect teaching belong (1) to the larger context of stories of transmission in Indian literature in general, for example, the story of Arjuna from the *Mahābhārata*, in which transmission is an agonistic encounter, often with a teacher who is a deity in disguise. The encounter has little to do with ordinary learning. We have seen later examples of this model from hagiographical texts on Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja. (2) The language of the Buddhist stories also ties them to the larger world of Indian ritual texts, most specifically to the ritual of consecration or *dīkṣā*. And lastly but perhaps most importantly, (3) the stories of the transmission of the teaching as we have them in the *avadāna* collections are part of a prominent group of *avadāna* stories that describe the future Buddha's self-sacrifice.

In this paper I have attempted to begin to study these contexts, but clearly a larger task awaits the researcher who would seek more fully to understand these unusual tales. The problem is further complicated by the fact that each of these individual "contexts" may itself be multiple in meaning and occasion. For example, studies of the Indian Buddhist story literature on self-sacrifice have tended to focus on the material as "stories" (Granoff 1990). There is some inscriptional evidence that indicates an actual practice of donation of body limbs by a king at the time of a widespread disaster, possibly a plague. Thus in the Sanjan copper plates of Amoghavasha I in verses 47 ff. we hear of how the king Vīranārāyaṇa cut off his finger and dedicated it to the goddess

Mahālakṣmī to ward off some public calamity (Bhandarkar 1925-1926). This may in turn relate to ancient medical beliefs about the restorative power of flesh, particularly human flesh (Carakasamhitā 2.11-14; 17; 4.41, 9.155, etc.; Zimmermann 1987:170; 188).

At this stage of my research two possible lines of inquiry suggest themselves. One is to study more fully the role of self-sacrifice in Buddhist story literature and as a paradigm for ritual. Another would be to return to the concept of transmission of teaching as study under a master, the notion of a *saṃpradāya*, that I mentioned briefly in discussing the *Śaṅkaradigvijaya* and to consider carefully its relationship to the transmission of the teaching in the stories studied here. Both remain for a future occasion.

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